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Following the Students' Lead: Exploring the Value of Incentives

by Greta Davis

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Action research begins in the middle of whatever you're doing something happens that you didn't expect- and you begin to wonder about what's going on. (Judith Newman, 1998)

Initial Plans

As teachers, we know that the plans we make and the journeys we embark upon daily in our classrooms often do not align. For me this is what makes teaching exciting and why I consider my role as a teacher researcher essential to the ongoing improvement of my practice. Classrooms are dialogic communities (Bakhtin, 1986) that collectively construct an understanding that is unique to the setting and to the time. I had discovered through previous cycles of action research that my students' insights and questions could prompt me to ask new questions and investigate issues that I would never have anticipated. The beginning of such journeys focused on questions involving my classroom practice. Usually I was interested in implementing a new strategy in my classroom such as novel discussions or class meetings to discover how these practices might contribute to my vision of a caring, inclusive community where students had a voice in their own learning.

Recently, I decided to focus on how children perceive the learning activities I give them. I believed this would not only help improve my students' metacognitive skills by encouraging them to identify what strategies best helped them to learn but it would also help my practice by understanding how my goals for activities might differ from their goals. I shared this interest with the students at the beginning of the year and asked for their assistance in exploring these issues.

I planned to use a means of data collection that my DICEP colleagues had proposed. It involved pausing or "freezing" a learning session so that open dialogue could occur and the class's thoughts regarding an activity could be recorded. I felt it would be important to discover what the students felt was the purpose of the activity and what they thought they were learning while in the middle of the activity. I hoped the data would allow me to begin to explore if our perceived purpose of the activity was similar or different. I also wanted to know if the students felt the activity was meeting their learning needs. I wondered what types of learners were in my classroom and if they knew what types of learners they were. Did certain types of activities or instructional strategies match their learning styles and needs? What types of activities were the most enjoyable for them? Could they tell you why certain activities allowed them to be successful? These questions provided a framework for planning my initial investigation.

My classroom consisted of 26 grade five students from culturally diverse backgrounds. There were 10 boys and 16 girls in our classroom. I began the year by providing my students with the tools to identify their learning styles. We used a multiple intelligences survey to determine their dominant learning style. This was something I had always done early in the school year but this year it was going to serve as the foundation for a new cycle of action research.

Emerging Tensions

As I collected data from the students I also kept a journal of our classroom activities and my perceptions of the tasks. However, I found I wasn't feeling engaged with the data I was collecting from the students regarding how they viewed certain learning activities. I felt that I wasn't making progress with my research. My interest was waning. The momentum that had been there in previous cycles of action research didn't seem present. In retrospect, I don't believe I ever truly engaged with the initial questions I generated. I was struggling with other issue in my classroom, issues of a more social nature and these social tensions didn't fit with my proposed research focus. The road to developing a caring, inclusive and equitable classroom that year was encountering several bumps.

It wasn't until I began reading Gallas's (1998) work involving issues of power, gender and identity and chose to share this research with my DICEP colleagues that I began to experience that excitement that keeps me coming back for new cycles of action research. Gallas (1998) was writing about the "bad boys" in her classroom and her stories seemed to mirror my own classroom experience in grade five that year. I too felt I had some students that fit her caricature of the "bad boys. She used this term to describe how these boys viewed themselves and were viewed by other children and their teachers. The boys were described as bad in terms of the street lingo that they so admired and tried to use; bad, meaning they pushed the boundaries of all behavioural norms, and bad, meaning they were risky, attractive, desirable, cool. They were the students who tended to challenge teachers. They were not naturally mean-spirited but experimental; social scientists studying the effect of their behaviour on others. Furthermore, they often cared deeply about the well-being of classmates (Gallas, 1998).

It wasn't just Gallas's fascination with these students that resonated with me. As I read about her journey into this particular cycle of action research, in which she wrestled with issues of power, gender and identity, she spoke of losing her ability to see where she was going with her research. She sensed that she was clearly working on a question but the nature of the question was unclear for a considerable period of time. I too felt as if something was lying beneath the surface of my classroom, something that I wasn't willing to pursue. I knew it involved some of the "bad boys" in our classroom community but I couldn't see the forest for the trees.

Previous experience had helped me to realize that I couldn't expect my action research to be neat and tidy. This knowledge however did not prevent me from becoming frustrated during the process. My frustrations were evident both in my journal and at our monthly DICEP meetings in the fall. There was a tension in my practice, a grain of sand irritating me the way it does when it gets in between one's toes, and it had little to do with my initial questions. However, I knew that I had to pay attention to that tiny grain of sand.

Millar Power (2000) emphasizes that what you are worried about represents the gap between what you are seeing and saying or between your practice and your vision. In my case I desired a caring, equitable and inclusive environment because I believe that it is essential to learning. Unfortunately, that wasn't exactly what was evolving in our classroom community and my planned action research needed to take a back seat. I decided I would have to abandon my initial research proposal and make the question of how to involve the students as co-researchers in exploring these tensions my primary focus.

Critical Incidents

As I was struggling with how to refocus my research and deal with the tensions in my practice a critical incident occurred in my classroom. Critical incidents are moments that stand out from the general flow of everyday classroom practice. They often allow us to see with new eyes some aspect of what we do. They make us aware of the beliefs and assumptions that underlie our instructional practices and they often occur in the muddle of daily work Newman (1998).

The critical incident in my research occurred during a class meeting. As I have established them, the classroom meeting is a time when students are emotionally involved in raising issues, asking and seeking answers to questions that are relevant to them (Donoahue, 2001, Bien & Stern, 1994; Murphy, 1991). In my classroom, class meetings also provide an opportunity to reflect on and celebrate classroom accomplishments. It is a time when "teacher" talk does not prevail. We work together to find answers to their questions and in the process we contribute to the development of our community. I have always encouraged my students to share their perspectives regarding how things are in our classroom and I try to really listen when they do and one of the main ways in which this is promoted is through our class meetings.

During one of our class meetings - which in retrospect I wish I had taped - my students voiced a concern over some social aspects of our classroom such as the noisiness of the room, the time wasted waiting for people, etc. I asked them what they suggested we could do to work towards solving the problem and they proposed an incentive type program be introduced in our classroom. One of their rationales was that the other grade 5 and 5/6 classes had a similar format.

My initial reaction was to veto the idea. External reinforcement was contrary to my beliefs about developing self-directed and internally motivated students. I had tried them in the past, but with limited success, and I felt there were more important matters to address than implementing an incentive program. However, I did not want to completely ignore their request. If I truly valued their voice in our classroom community I needed to explore the possibility with them. Class meetings had provided a forum for my students to share in the decision making of our community and I did not want to violate that agreement.

In addition, implementing an incentive program wasn't a non-negotiable item. Extending recess everyday, abandoning homework, or reorganizing the school timetable to meet our class's needs were non-negotiables because they were issues beyond my control. The students knew these parameters of our class meeting discussions. Implementing such a program was just something I would have preferred not to do as a teacher as it didn't fit with my vision of an inclusive, caring

and equitable classroom. On the other hand, it was also apparent that my students realized as I did that the current classroom environment did not match the vision to which I aspired.

I have always been uncomfortable with incentive programs. In part, because I never felt that there was a way to ensure that everything a student did was recognized or that it even should be. I always felt that I couldn't reinforce consistently enough to manage behaviour incentive programs for individual students and I think part of me fundamentally disagreed with them but the student's enthusiasm was overwhelming and almost encouraging. We all had a vested interest in this topic whereas my initial research was really of interest only to me. The entire class was in full support of such a program. I decided to examine their feelings and beliefs about such a system, and so began a new cycle of action research. I began to generate some new questions: What is considered to be the value of such a program? What was my role going to be in this process? What did students perceive as the value and purpose of such a program?

In this way, the students' initiative became the catalyst of my research. The student suggestion to change the current practice in our classroom raised an issue that became the beginning of our co-research. My students guided my exploration of a tension in my practice that I had been unable to tackle by myself.

Student Perceptions

Before we developed a plan of action I invited the students to stop and reflect on the reasons for the proposed plan of action. This would have ideally occurred within the initial classroom meeting if I had prompted them to stop and reflect. Instead it occurred the following day and was taped. The following is a portion of the transcript.

Teach: Let's begin by discussing why as a class we feel the need for the type of program that has been proposed.

Dawn: We need it to help get people to do things like to be good.

Val: Yea, like you can get recognized for doing it.

Teach: What is it that we need to be able to do?

May: People need to do what the teacher says so we don't waste time and it needs to be quieter sometimes.

Clay: Maybe people just need to be nicer and cooperate

Amar: I think we need to do more of not putting people down.

Clay: I agree. It's like sort of part what we did for the assembly on friendship and respect but now we would get tickets for it.

A Plan of Action

It was decided by the students that we would have weekly draws in the classroom. Students could earn a ticket for the draw by doing things which made them a "good student". The students decided what would constitute earning a ticket for the draw. These included homework completion, being ready for instruction after a transition time by having desks cleared, organized desks, sitting quietly, listening carefully to announcements, helping others, etc. It was also decided that tickets could be given if someone did a good deed without being asked and that the teacher could give out a ticket or another student could nominate that person to receive a ticket by pointing out what they had done.

The draws happened twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays. It was agreed that five names would be drawn from the ticket bin on each day and I agreed initially to provide the incentives to fill the prize bin. The organizer, who was a member of the class duty roster, would be in charge of giving out tickets at the beginning of the day for having agendas signed, and also for recognizing people who were ready after transition times. I was grateful not to have to monitor the entire system myself. I wanted to give the students as much ownership of it as possible and see where it would lead.

During the first few months there was always great anticipation about the draw. Everyone was always reminding me of the draw and some of the students even brought in prizes to donate to the draw that they thought someone else might like. In the initial weeks it seemed to be working. Individuals commented both in class meetings and in journal entries that they enjoyed the program, felt it was a good idea and that it was having an impact on improving the classroom climate. With time however, grumblings began to arise about the draw in our weekly meetings.

Student Reflections

It was the boys (bad boys included) who began to complain that only girls' names were being drawn from the basket and that this was unfair. The issue led to a discussion of probability. We discussed how the number of tickets received by a student could increase the probability of his or her name being drawn but that the outcome of the draw would not always match a very real life connection to the grade five math curriculum. It also revealed important questions for our community. The students started to question who was in control of the tickets and challenge the criteria they had created for awarding them. The following is a partial transcript of a class meeting discussion where such issues began to arise.

Mat: Why is it always girls' names? The boys just don't. we never win.

Sam: That's because there is a better chance for girls.

May: Ya, like there are more of us than them so we should get chosen.

Di: But I never do and I always have lots of tickets and that doesn't seem fair either. I don't think it matters if you are a boy or girl, everyone should get a chance to win.

Clay: But that shouldn't matter. We learned everyone has an equal chance but if we like get more ticketseach of us (boys) than we should be able to win. We just need to get more tickets.

Sam: I think the girls tend to get the most tickets because.well because we can sometimes be quiet and stuff.

Mat: But that's what I mean. It's not fair because the girls give out the tickets and they ignore us. We can't always be quiet like they are. Sometimes I am being quiet but not always when they check.

Shawn: Ya, I agree they (the girls) always walk on by when it's time to give out tickets and sometimes I'm not here when you are checking stuff so that's not fair either.

Farv: That's not true. You just aren't always ready when we check so that's why you miss out and the organizer isn't always a girl.

Shawn: Yes it is, always.

Mat: I often have my work done but I can't always find it in time. They don't wait, just move on.

Dave: Me too! I think we need to see who gets to give the tickets and what we get them for. I think boys should give them out more often otherwise the girls are only going to give to the girls so why bother?

Teach: How could we determine whether certain people are being recognized with tickets or by having their name drawn?

Mat: We could just ask who's wonthen we'd prove it's unfair.

Sam: What if we don't remember? Maybe we can see whose names are coming out, write them down and the organizer too.

Dave: Yeah let's do it.

One of the students later suggested counting the number of names in the hat which we did. The boys were underrepresented in the draw in terms of overall number of tickets but almost everyone had a ticket in the draw. However, there were several boys who did not have tickets in the draw. These were students who exhibited the characteristics Galls (1998) described in her caricature of bad boys. They were also the ones who agreed strongly with Mat in the above transcription that things were not fair, although they were not always vocal in the class meetings.

I was not surprised that the boys perceived inequity in the draw. Why wouldn't they see an inequity? So often they were not recognized for doing the "right" thing. Gallas (1998) speaks of this when she writes about how girls can be more compliant within the confines of the classroom. On examination of the number of tickets in the latest draw I realized that the boys were underrepresented but did that mean the draw wasn't "fair"? Since we were engaging in co-

research I decided to ask the students. Did they feel the draw was fair? What did they like/dislike about it?

The majority of the students said they felt the draw was fair and that it was a good thing to have in our classroom. Even the students who received lots of tickets but rarely had their name come out of the draw indicated they enjoyed it. The following are comments taken from their journals.

- "The draw is good because you deserve to get a reward when you do something good"
- "When we get rewarded people act better the draw is fair"
- "I like the draw because the class is good because they all want a prize"
- "I like getting rewarded for good behaviour. You get recognized for the effort you put it in. It's a fair system"
- "I think it is fair. It's nice to get recognized"
- "The draw makes us try hardI think it's fair"
- What was interesting was the "bad boy" responses. They saw the draw as unfair. As one student put it,
- "The draw's not fair because the people that try hard to be good get rewarded but not all of them show how hard they try. It's in their personality. Like lots of people are funny and without their personality it (the classroom)would be just perfect and everyone would be perfect and no one would stand out. That would be boring. Some of us just don't get tickets cause, well that's not what's important but I do feel happy when I get rewarded."

Upon further conversation during a classroom meeting some of the "bad boys" reaffirmed that buying into the draw wasn't always important for them. As one "bad boy" put it:

"Sometimes, like last week my name comes out when I only have a few tickets and that makes me real proud. I want lots of tickets but sometimes I can't because I'm making my friends happy I'm talking."

It was apparent that, while these students wanted to be recognized for succeeding, the tickets weren't always valued. While they cared about their fellow classmates and wanted to cooperate, sometimes they needed to liven things up in the room, to be the center of attention, and that wouldn't constitute behaviour deserving of a ticket. They were willing to accept this.

New Actions

Through our whole class discussions and small group interviews I began to realize that the question wasn't about fairness but about purpose and outcome. Had the draw significantly changed the issues that brought about its inception? What was really being gained from it? I decided to raise these issues by sharing one student's view from their journal, "I like the draw but in a way it is sort of bribing us to be good".

Again, the majority of the class agreed that the draw was bribery in a way and those that didn't agree then did so later in the privacy of their journals. The bad boys were very vocal in the discussion, citing the bribery as a reason why they didn't always comply. They still saw it as fun

to have the draw because it was "exciting to see who's name would be drawn". This seemed to be a drawing feature as well as the recognition.

In that discussion we decided to find out exactly who had received a ticket for the draw that week. Indeed everyone had, although the number of tickets varied. I emphasized how significant it was that everyone had been successful and suggested that perhaps rather than the individual prizes that week we elect to do something as a class to celebrate.

The class decided that the reward would be to go tobogganing on the hill of our playground. This was very motivating as the students were not allowed to do this during the normal school day for safety reasons. One hundred percent of the class was in favour of tobogganing.

Student journal responses after the tobogganing event indicated that this was an activity they enjoyed and they seemed to sense that it was something they had accomplished together.

"I had fun because I really like tobogganing with D. I also got to try out G's snowboard. That was cool. It was even more fun than the draw"

"It was fun to go outside and not do school work. I think we did a great job of getting along and sharing the crazy carpets. If we work together we can make our class better and have more fun."

Our incentive program evolved from that point to focus more on rewarding whole class actions. The students began to track tickets. The emphasis became less on how many each person received but did everyone meet the goal of earning tickets. As the year progressed we began to tie in our weekly individual goal setting that had been occurring all year into our classroom meeting time. Individuals took turns sharing their goals and providing evidence that they felt illustrated they had met a goal, either their own or one of the classroom goals that had been previously determined by the whole class. This event occurred at the beginning of our class meetings as a celebration time.

This new system didn't solve all of our problems in the classroom community, but it was the beginning of my students choosing to alter the original incentive system. There was a realization that the "fun" of the draw could be achieved in other ways that included everyone in the class. It was evidence of my students' metacognition skills as well as of effective learning. As one student said in an interview,

"The draw was fun but it was bribery... we knew that but it was fun. Having spirit days is fun too but it's different. I like that we get to pick them It gives us a say in things. I guess we had a say in the draw but we found it didn't work for everyone. I think our class behaviour is better now that everyone gets recognized. We kinda understand each other more now we work together we talk about it. It's not a like a contest like when we did the draw."

We began to have classroom spirit times. Time was devoted to doing something special together. For example, we had more tobogganing days, popcorn days (where the students volunteered to provide the popcorn), dress-up days, etc. Ideas were generated by the students in our classroom meetings and voted upon. The students and I began to work towards more of a group reward

system in which everyone was included. We generated ideas around ways to promote community that did not take the form of incentive type programs. We created a wall in our classroom for recognizing each other's accomplishments based on student suggestions. Both students and teachers could put up messages to recognize someone for being a good friend, doing a good deed, accomplishing a personal goal.

We also supplemented our monthly school assemblies that recognize one student per class for academic achievement and one for the monthly school social skill with our own classroom awards that recognized each student for a personal accomplishment that month. Some of these ideas were more valued by certain students than others but I believe the importance of their existence lies in the fact that the ideas came from the students as attempts to co-construct our classroom community. Together we were listeners, problem solvers, decision makers and co-researchers.

The Value of Co-Research

Co-researching was one of the guiding principles behind this action research. I wanted to share my questions with the students and include their perceptions in my research. What happened was beyond what I could have envisioned. Sharing in the decision-making of our classroom community enabled us to explore questions together. My students generated the focus of the research because, I believe, the opportunity was provided. Together, we learned about our own perceptions, how they influenced our behaviour and affected our community development.

Hume (2001) discovered that when groups of students are given the opportunity to participate in collaborative research, "the possibility exists for the creation of vital knowledge-building communities, which may, through their example, transform the way we think about teaching, learning and schooling." I found this to be true in my own experience. The investigation was empowering for the students. They became agents in their own learning and this learning extended beyond the walls of our classroom. Some students began to make connections between our classroom and the broader school environment. They reflected on the value and purpose of reading incentive programs they had experienced in our school as a result of our experiences with the classroom draw.

"Reading books is like bribery too when you get the awards. The only people who get awards are the ones who like reading. It doesn't make everyone read more just like the tickets don't make people do things I think you have to want to improve yourself."

Other students discussed the Student of the Month social and academic awards that were given out in the school. Our class had always nominated students for the awards rather than relying solely on teacher selection. Some students began to question the equity of the awards. Could everyone be recognized within the criteria of the school awards? A very valid question that I don't think would have been raised if we hadn't been exploring similar issue together in our classroom and a forum wasn't available to share such reflections. These students, many of the "bad boys" included, felt they should have a voice in setting their own goals for success.

Co-research has definitely transformed some of my students. The grade six teachers report that my students have persuaded them to revamp past reward programs based on their experiences in grade five. I have also shared with the students how our learning together in grade five has impacted my current pre-service teacher's perceptions of reward programs. My past grade five students know that future teachers are reading their comments because they are investigating similar issues in their classrooms. The knowledge that their voice has affected the beliefs and practices of future teachers is very empowering for children, perhaps even transformational.

In Retrospect

Judith Newman (1998) tells us that as teachers we need to be open to being surprised by critical incidents, including well laid plans that went awry and activities that took off beyond our expectations. Part of this journey involved the realization that I could share control in the initial development of my inquiry. Issues important to me are often also important to my students. The tension I felt in my classroom was shared by many of my students. By sharing and listening to each others' perceptions we created ways to try to address everyone in our classroom community. The students and I planned, acted and reflected together to improve our environment.

I had never paused to reflect on my prior experiences with incentive programs until this cycle of research. I had willingly tried them and not found them to be successful. It was only while engaging in co-research with my students, seeing their perspectives and listening to their stories, that I began to truly see they hadn't fit with my philosophy.

This journey was not a neat and tidy process as one might anticipate action research to be. Many researchers have noted the organic nature of action research (Gallas, 1994; Newman, 1998) and this experience reaffirmed it. It has taken me many months of sifting through the data, reflecting and talking to colleagues to enable me to write about what I learned alongside my students. My initial discomfort with my students' request to implement an incentive program evolved into an improved understanding on the part of all my students. The "bad" boys contributed to the source of tension in the classroom. As co-researchers we discovered some of the reasons why. I began to see the need to re-examine my beliefs about these students and to understand them better. They are often the students who cause us stress, not because of their academics but because of the manner in which they interact in the classroom. I've learned to look at these students in a new light to examine the parameters in which I am asking them to operate to look at my own practice more closely and determine how I can better include them in the classroom community. They aren't always going to choose to comply with behavioural expectations even if they have been given a say in their creation but I want them to have a voice and I want to better understand their perspective.

At the beginning of this journey I wanted my students to feel agentive in their own learning, to increase their metacognitive skills and to engage in co-research. What I have learned is that such goals can't always be accomplished with a preconceived plan. If it was to be co-research it needed to be something in which both the students and I had vested interests. My initial plan might have accomplished my predetermined goals, but because I chose to explore an issue that emerged from the daily life of my classroom, my students and I surpassed my goals and individually achieved some of our own. While the nature of the co-research topic was social

there were also many academic benefits. Imagine the possibilities if, as teachers, we didn't always begin with the end in mind when teaching our students. What if we were open to negotiating the curriculum with our students? Co- research can provide the opportunity to enrich the specified curriculum in which we currently work and moving beyond that curriculum can be transformational for everyone involved.